



ESRC Wales Doctoral
Training Partnership
Partneriaeth Hyfforddiant
Doethurol Cymru ESRC

Democratic Experimentation, Sub-states and the Future of Democracy

Project description

The troubled relationship between the sovereign state and democracy is becoming increasingly apparent. While historically conjoined in much of the European experience, in recent years democracy is (more visibly) escaping the bounds, controls and interests of sovereign states. Whether in sub-state governance arrangements, in cities, or in activist communities, ‘democracy beyond the state’ thrives – even as states increasingly attempt to ‘discipline’ democratic practices into the mould of the sovereign state.

This project **aims to investigate experiments in democratic politics ‘beyond the state’, and specifically the democratic experiments afoot in ‘sub-states’** (including devolved regions and cities). As such, it seeks to add to the existing literature on innovation in democratic theory and practice. In particular, the project seeks to improve our empirical understanding of innovative democratic practices in sub-states and to open up new theoretical and policy avenues in thinking and practising democracy. Besides undertaking focused work on case studies in the UK (Wales), Europe (Catalonia) and North America (California), this project will engage with existing debates on the global implications of democratic experimentation for understanding the future of democratic governance.

The project will address the following **research questions**:

- What types of democratic experimentation are evident amongst sub-state governance arrangements and large cities? What are their relative strengths and weaknesses?
- Are initiatives in ‘democratic escape’ constrained by existing state and international settings?
- What are the broader implications of these experiments, including for future modes of democratic governance?

The research questions will be investigated in two key ways:

First, the project will engage with the existing literature on democratic governance, democratic innovation and experimentation and explore the extent to which sub-state democratic initiatives are recognised in these literatures.

Secondly, the project will undertake comparative case study based research of democratic experimentation in the UK, Europe and North America. Case study based research will utilise a mixed qualitative approach, including extensive use of primary materials and interviews with key policy makers and stakeholders, to develop a detailed understanding of the relative impact of experiments in democracy in enhancing sub-state democratic practices and their broader implications.

In sum, this project is motivated by the realisation that democracy has always been a historically changing, shifting and evolving model of governance. The project seeks to contribute to increasing scholarly interest in understanding democracy's trajectory through changing social forces and at the same time seeks to benefit from and feed into innovative democratic practice.

Collaboration

The project is designed as collaborative research with the **National Assembly for Wales**, which will be involved in the following ways:

1. The project will benefit from the input of the National Assembly for Wales's expertise in democratic initiatives as the project's supervisory team will include an Assembly Commission official.
2. The PhD student will undertake at least one placement at the Assembly during the period of the studentship and will facilitate dialogue and knowledge exchange between academia and policy-making.
3. Dr Royles, Professor Kurki and the DTP studentship holder will collaborate with the Assembly to organise two workshops related to democratic experimentation amongst sub-state legislatures.

Organisational partner

The National Assembly for Wales is the democratically elected body that represents the interests of Wales and its people, makes laws for Wales, agrees Welsh taxes and holds the Welsh Government to account. Since its inception, it has developed a range of initiatives to promote democratic participation and engagement. The most recent of these include the establishment of a Welsh Youth Parliament in 2018, the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill which lowers the voting age to 16 in devolved elections from 2021, and citizens' assemblies. National Assembly for Wales: <http://www.assembly.wales/en/Pages/Home.aspx>.

Supervisors

[Dr Elin Royles](#), Senior Lecturer and [Professor Milja Kurki](#), Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University. Their areas of specialisation include territorial politics, international relations, democratic governance, and democratic theory and practices, including projects funded by the ERC and ESRC.